

## Defy 711

### Chapter 711: Natalie's Skeletons

"It's finally on?" Dion said out loud, leaning in without thinking to glance at her phone.

Natalie sucked in a sharp breath when she lifted her head, and they were suddenly so close that all she had to do was tilt her chin slightly and their lips would meet.

The thought was so random and so sudden that it startled her. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Geez, so sorry," Dion apologized quickly, stepping back at once. He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "I was just excited, I didn't even think."

Natalie cleared her throat. "It's fine. It's not like you're a plague or something. I just don't like random touches, or touchy, grabby people."

"If you say so," Dion muttered, scratching his head awkwardly.

Meanwhile, the two werewolf guards watched them with open intrigue but said nothing. It was far too early to make any assumptions, though the awkward tension between the two humans was admittedly entertaining.

Natalie tilted the screen toward Dion. "That's outside the school," he said, frowning. "What does she even want with your phone? Why go through all this trouble? To hack your money?"

It wouldn't be surprising. Natalie Avax was filthy rich.

"That would be the dumbest plan I've ever seen," Natalie scoffed. "If she came all the way into Lunaris just to rob me, only to end up being tracked in under an hour, then she's not very bright."

She lifted her gaze. "Come. Her location isn't far. We can track her down with my car."

"Aye, captain," Dion smirked, excitement lighting his eyes. "Us on a covert recovery mission during school hours. I mean, look at us, detectives in training. And to think I was complaining about being bored when adventure was just around the corner."

"Just shut up and follow me, Dion," Natalie said, rolling her eyes, though a small smile tugged at her lips.

"Thank you for your help," Dion rushed out just as Natalie seized him by the scruff of his shirt and dragged him away. It was almost hilarious.

The bell had just rang, and the cobbled walkway came alive with activity. Students poured out from different corridors in waves, some rushing with textbooks hugged to their chests, others strolling leisurely in clusters, laughing, shoving, and flirting, alive with gossip and noise.

Dion stood off to the side of the pathway where Natalie had told him to wait, hands in his pockets. Suddenly, the growl of an engine sliced through the chatter.

As expected, heads turned as a sleek red car curved into the lane like it owned the road. The car was glossy, low-slung and aggressively elegant. Yes, it was the kind of car that announced itself without effort — the ones royalties like Natalie Avax rode.

Sunlight glinted off its polished hood, the windows tinted just enough to hide the driver until it rolled to stop just mere inches from Dion's legs.

Natalie Avax sat behind the wheel and the gossip started instantly.

An elite human heiress pulling up for nobody like him during school hours was enough to ignite a hundred rumors in ten seconds. And for as long as the students knew, Natalie had never had a boyfriend.

So yes, this was shocking.

Dion lifted a brow at Natalie's deliberate gesture. So this was what it felt like to stand inside a headline before it was written. And to think he'd been begging her an hour ago for a show like this.

The passenger door unlocked with a soft click.

"Are you getting in, or are you enjoying your debut as a public attraction?" Natalie muttered through the open window, smug as hell.

Dion smirked and moved to cross around the front of the car when his phone vibrated.

Not just his. All around him, phones buzzed at once.

A ripple of sound spread through the walkway as students stopped mid-step, pulling out their devices, brows furrowing in confusion.

Though Dion didn't need to see the headlines to know what was coming, he felt it in his bones that another piece of gossip was already being born. And it wouldn't surprise him one bit if it had his and Natalie's names stamped all over it.

Information had a way of flying around here. Still, he opened the article anyway, and froze.

Dion's grip on the door handle slackened, the same time the breath left his lungs in a quick rush. The words on the screen blurred and sharpened all at once, the implications crashing into him faster than he could process.

"Dion?" Natalie called from the driver's seat. "Are you coming in or not?"

He didn't answer.

"Dion," she said again, louder now. "What the hell is wrong?"

Slowly, he lifted his head and looked at her. It was something in his expression. Was it shock tangled with pity? Unease? A warning?

Natalie felt uncomfortable and that was when she looked around to realize the walkway had gone silent. Not entirely silent but something was wrong.

She noticed the way heads bent together with their eyes lifting toward her, whispering. Some of them even angled their phones discreetly in her direction. The stares she'd grown used to had changed flavor. There was no more admiration, this was judgment.

Her stomach dropped.

Natalie didn't need to be told.

She picked up her phone and clicked the notification she had received moments ago but chosen to ignore. The headline blazed across the screen:

Scandal of the Elites: Kate Avax in Illicit Relationship with Daughter, Natalie Avax.

Beneath it were screenshots of the twisted, sick conversations Kate had sent her.

Natalie's breath left her lungs in a rush. She had archived those messages. Hidden them so deep she had almost convinced herself they never existed.

Virginia must have dug them up.

That was why she stole her phone.

To ruin her.

For a moment, Natalie couldn't process what she was seeing. Blood roared in her ears, drowning out the sounds around her. Her hands began to shake as she scrolled, horror crawling through every inch of her body.

Then Dion was screaming her name.

"Natalie! Natalie, open up!"

She hadn't even realized she'd shut the car door.

No.

She didn't want to see him.

She didn't want him to see her.

She didn't want to see anyone.

Panic took over. Her chest felt too tight, her vision swimming and without thinking, Natalie shifted the gear.

The engine roared to life. She sped off.

Dion barely jumped back in time as the car shot forward, tires squealing against the stone. Students stumbled out of the way as Natalie raced through the grounds.

#### Chapter 712: The Accident

Dion had never truly understood the relationship between Micah and Natalie. At one point, he had even thought they were an item, considering how fiercely protective Micah was of her.

But that theory never made sense. How could they be together when Micah still slept with other people so openly? Dion had once reasoned that perhaps being an incubus was simply too complicated and that he and Natalie had reached some strange agreement between them.

Now he fully understood.

That was why Natalie hated being touched. That was why she kept a distance from everyone.

People thought it was arrogance. That she was just Natalie Avax with her nose stuck high in the sky. All because she had money.

But this wasn't pride, it was trauma.

And Micah hadn't been overprotective, he had been guarding her. He'd known from the start and carried the secret alone. Even from him.

And now Dion knew if anything happened to Natalie, Micah would wring the life out of him. His demon boss had told him specifically before leaving to keep an eye on her.

"Fuck!" Dion cursed, pacing along the edge of the road as students stared and whispered around him. He dragged a hand through his hair, panic tightening in his chest.

Then he spotted a power bike cut through the road ahead, ridden by one of the senior students. Dion didn't recognize the rider, but that didn't matter. He needed to get to Natalie before she did something stupid.

He stepped into the road and waved the bike down hard.

"Hey, man!" the rider snapped as he stopped in front of Dion.

Another rich kid. Good. It would be easier dealing with him than a werewolf.

So in one swift move, he grabbed the rider's collar and yanked him clean off the bike.

"Hey!" the senior shouted as he hit the ground.

"You'll get it back!" Dion barked over his shoulder.

He swung onto the bike, flipped the ignition switch, kicked the stand up, squeezed the clutch, and slammed the starter.

The engine roared to life beneath him.

Before the shocked owner could even stand, Dion twisted the throttle and shot forward, the tires screeching as he tore down the road.

Just like Natalie, Dion zoomed off recklessly, sending students scrambling out of the way, their backpacks flying and screams trailing behind him.

Yep, there was no doubt. He would write about himself in moon feed exclusive.

Dion didn't slow down, not when he needed to catch up with Natalie.

Students needed permission before leaving the school grounds, but Dion didn't care as he raced toward the entrance. Perhaps it was because they recognized him from earlier, or maybe it was the hard, determined look on his face, but the guards lifted the barrier before he even reached it, letting him pass without a word.

There was no sign of Natalie at first, but the road leading out of Lunaris stretched as a single lane for several kilometers. That meant she could only have gone one way. The real problem was what direction she would take once the road branched out.

Dion clenched his teeth and pushed the bike harder. He had never driven at this speed in his life, but desperate times demanded desperate measures. The wind whipped against his face, the engine roaring beneath him as the narrow stretch of road finally broke into multiple lanes ahead. Panic fluttered in his chest. What if she had already turned off somewhere?

Then, like a miracle, he spotted Natalie's car.

Relief slammed into him so hard he almost laughed. For the first time in his life, Dion was grateful she drove a car no one else owned.

Natalie was still driving at full speed, and given her emotional state, it was beyond dangerous. Dion didn't know how to handle this. Pulling up in front of her might startle her and cause an accident. Calling her on the phone wasn't an option either, not at this speed, not while he struggled to keep control of the bike himself.

Hence Dion kept a careful distance, staying close enough that his presence would register in her side mirror if she bothered to look.

But Natalie didn't look, still driving too fast, her tires screaming against the asphalt. Her recklessness told Dion she wasn't just driving, Natalie was running from the scandal. From all of them. And he couldn't blame her.

"Slow down," Dion muttered under his breath, teeth clenched as the bike vibrated beneath him. He turned on the bike's headlight and flashed it twice in quick succession.

Still, Natalie didn't react. Her gaze was still

locked straight ahead, her emotions in a turmoil.

"Come on... come on, Natalie," Dion leaned forward, pushing the bike faster, riding closer now but never directly in front of her. His eyes stung as he squinted through the rush and flashed the light again.

For one terrifying second, Dion thought she would keep going, but her speed dipped just a bit.

She saw him. Finally!

Her eyes caught the flash of the bike in the mirror and their gazes met.

For one fragile moment, the world narrowed to just the two of them — Natalie's tear-blurred eyes wide with shock, and his mouth moving around her name.

"Natalie—"

Then tragedy struck.

From the opposite lane, a dark-colored car barreled forward at full speed and Natalie didn't see it on time. When she noticed, the car was already too close.

"NATALIE!" Dion screamed.

The driver swerved at the last second, blasting his horn violently. Natalie reacted on instinct, jerking the steering wheel hard to the right. But the red car veered too sharply and her tires lost grip.

The back of the car fishtailed twice before the entire vehicle spun out of control. Dion watched in horror as the sleek red beauty left the road completely.

It was as if time slowed as the car slammed through brush and loose gravel before crashing violently into a thick tree with a sound like the explosion of metal.

"NO!"

#### Chapter 713: Dying Is Better

Dion skidded to a halt, throwing the bike aside before sprinting toward the wreckage. Smoke poured from the crumpled hood, the front of the car completely destroyed.

The driver's airbag had exploded from the steering wheel, and draped over Natalie's chest now it was deflated.

"Natalie! Natalie!" Dion shouted, panic shredding his voice as he reached the door.

The glass had shattered inward, shards scattered across the seat and glass, while the windscreen was webbed with deep, splintering cracks.

Inside, Natalie was slumped forward against the deployed airbag, blood streaking down the side of her forehead. Her eyes were open, but it was unfocused, and glassy with shock.

"Oh God..."

Dion's hands shook violently as he fumbled with the door handle, yanking it again and again until it finally creaked open with a scream of twisted metal.

Then he rushed forward, freezing for half a second, his hands hovering over her like he was terrified touching her might break her in two.

What if she was badly injured and he made it all worse? Unfortunately, he needed to get her out of that car.

"Natalie, hey—hey, stay with me," he pleaded.

Her lashes fluttered weakly.

"Dion...?" she whispered, barely audible.

As soon as Dion heard her speak, relief hit him so hard his knees nearly gave out.

"I'm here. You're okay. I've got you," he choked, carefully reaching for her this time.

People had already begun to step out of their cars, and judging by the siren wailing in the distance, someone must have called an ambulance.

Good. Good.

Except none of them offered to help as Dion lifted Natalie from the car and carried her a short distance before lowering her gently onto the ground. If anything, they all had their phones out, capturing the scene.

Dion didn't bother with them. His entire attention was fixed on Natalie.

Natalie drifted in and out of consciousness. Everything hurt. Her head throbbed and her chest felt tight. Not to mention, Dion kept calling her name.

"Natalie, stay with me. Listen to me, don't close your eyes. Look at me. Just me."

She had no choice but to obey, forcing her heavy lids open. But the world swam, everything blurry. Not to mention the humans were standing in a circle around her with their phones raised, recording her.

"No..." Natalie let out a weak whimper. She didn't want to be seen. She wanted to cower, to hide.

From the way she writhed and moaned on the ground, Dion sensed what was happening.

He turned to the crowd, rage blazing in his eyes. "Get those phones away from her! What is wrong with you people?!" His voice cracked with fury. "Fuck you all! Get the fuck away!"

His chest rose and fell hard. He had never been this angry for someone else in his entire life.

Thankfully, some of them obeyed. The rest hesitated, then slowly stepped back with their phones still in hand—but at least they backed away.

"Dion..." Natalie breathed again.

"I'm here," he said quickly, holding onto her hand tightly. "You're going to be fine. The ambulance is coming. You just have to stay awake, okay?"

Natalie wanted to say something but all that escaped her lips was a weak sound. Her eyes slipped shut again.

"No—no, stay with me," Dion said firmly, panic in his voice. "Talk to me. Yell at me. Anything, Natalie. Just don't sleep."

As if that wasn't enough, Dion shifted closer, intentionally blocking her view of the people and wrecked car.

Her breathing hitched, pain rippling across her face.

"I'm scared," Natalie confessed. "Am I going to die?"

Dion's heart nearly split in two at those words. Natalie didn't deserve any of this. To think he had always believed she lived a better life than his. Who knew she had been fighting battles this cruel in silence?

"You're not going to die," he told her, his voice shaking but firm with conviction. "I've got you. You're not alone. Just keep your eyes open for me, alright?"

"Or maybe... dying is better?" she whispered. There was a quiet resignation in her voice that terrified him far more than the blood on her face.

The thought of Natalie dying filled Dion with both fear and fury.

"I swear to God, Natalie, if you close those eyes, I'll—" he swallowed, "I'll kiss you until you wake up."

At the look she gave him, he hurried on, flustered, "Not like that. I just—don't you dare give up on me now. You're the strongest person I know."

His jaw tightened. "You're not the victim here, Kate is and she will pay for it. So don't give up, please."

For a moment, Natalie said nothing, and just stared at him.

Then, she murmured, "You're so weird..."

Dion let out a shaky laugh, every emotion crashing through him at once.

"If being weird keeps you alive," he breathed, "then I'll take it."

Finally, the ambulance arrived, the sirens almost deafening as red and blue lights painted the road in frantic colors. Paramedics burst through the crowd, shouting orders as they rushed toward them.

"We've got her!" one of them said, dropping to their knees beside Natalie. "Step back, sir."

"I'm not leaving her," Dion refused.

"She needs space."

That was the only reason he moved back. Even then, it was barely a step. Dion watched anxiously as they began assessing her injuries. One medic checked her pupils, shining a light into her eyes, while another fitted a neck brace around her throat with careful hands.

Natalie whimpered when they tried to move her.

"Hey, don't worry, I'm right here," Dion said instantly, gripping her hand before anyone could stop him. "I'm not leaving. You hear me? I'm right here."

Her fingers weakly tightened around his.

They lifted her onto the stretcher, and as usual, the crowd pressed closer, still filming everything.

When one of the paramedics tried to shove Dion back, he didn't budge.

"I'm going with her."

The medic met his eyes, taking in the raw determination blazing there, then gave a short nod. "Fine. Get in."

Dion climbed inside at once, taking his place beside her just as the ambulance doors slammed shut.

#### Chapter 714: No Escaping His Wrath

The doctors said Natalie was lucky as hell, considering the condition of her wrecked car. She had escaped the crash with only a mild head injury, two cracked ribs, and a bruised lung from the seatbelt and airbag impact.

All of this could have been far worse. She could have suffered internal brain bleeding or a skull fracture; the ribs could have pierced her lung, or multiple ribs could have collapsed inward, causing massive bleeding in the chest.

But none of that was the case. Instead, she was admitted to the ICU for monitoring. And just as Dion had promised her, he didn't leave her side.

Dion watched over her like her guardian angel, his brows furrowing at how fragile and vulnerable Natalie looked at that moment. There were so many machines attached to her body and though he knew she'd survive, he couldn't help but still worry.

It wasn't his fault, but Dion couldn't help feeling responsible for her. If only he hadn't distracted her earlier with his bike, she wouldn't be here.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed and Dion snapped out of it, wiping his face with his palm. He hadn't even realized the tears until now.

There was a notification on his screen. He opened the article, and froze.

Nicole, the Oracle's wannabe, had released a post about Natalie.

And it was exactly what he had dreaded.

#### LUNAR SCOOP: THE AVAX ILLUSION SHATTERS

Posted 3:00 PM | 2,401 comments | 198 reposts

Written by: Nicole.

Well... well... well.

If it isn't the fall of another golden idol.

Just when I thought our scandal quota was finally full after the Elsie Tapes, the universe said, "Hold my drink."

Today, Lunaris Academy choked on a scandal so thick even the Oracle's precious teacups must be rattling. Because the name on everyone's lips right now is not Violet, nor Elsie.

It's Natalie Avax.

Yes. That Natalie Avax. The untouchable. The heiress. The girl who looked down on everyone like we were dust on her designer heels.

And now?

Now her skeletons didn't just fall out of the closet. They kicked the door down.

Turns out diamonds shatter after all.

Rumors that started as whispers have exploded into full-blown wildfire across campus and online circles alike, all pointing to one horrifying claim:

That Natalie Avax was involved in an inappropriate relationship with her stepmother.

Let that sink in because no amount of family money can duct-tape this one back into the shadows.

Screenshots have surfaced this morning of private conversations allegedly between Natalie and Kate Avax. Messages that should never exist between a guardian and a child. Words no one expected to see linked to Lunaris's most polished human elite.

And before anyone rushes in screaming "but she's young!" — let's pause and remember one of the leaked messages : "I wish I was with you, kate. I wish father could just die and I could have you all to myself. I miss you."

I don't know what anyone thinks but this is emotional dependence so intense it borders on fixation. And if you still think this is just some innocent misunderstanding, I strongly suggest you re-read what devotion actually looks like when no one thinks they're being watched

However, who am I to judge, right?

But the cruel irony is the girl who sneered at Elsie's downfall is standing center stage herself. Funny how karma doesn't wait for applause and how fast the spotlight turns.

ENTER: DION, THE UNLUCKIEST LOVE INTEREST ALIVE

And poor, poor Dion.

Yes, our local keyboard warrior, and junior chaos distributor was spotted today getting very close to Natalie shortly before her accident.

So cute.

But let me ask the obvious question:

Does Dion know he's just the rebound character in a tragedy already written?

Because from the messages, it seems Natalie's feelings for Kate wasn't just messy, it's a consuming one. And first love scars deep.

My advice to Dion? It's not worth it darling, so run while your spine still bends.

#### THE ACCIDENT

Yes, it's confirmed.

Natalie Avax was involved in a serious crash this afternoon and is currently in the ICU. Official details are sealed. Unofficially, the panic probably played a role.

Was she fleeing the shame? Fear? Or the truth finally catching up?

We don't know.

But what we do know is that when reputations shatter this spectacularly, survival becomes secondary.

Still recovery is deserved. No matter what.

#### FINAL THOUGHT

Once again, Lunaris proves that power doesn't protect you from ruin, it only makes the fall louder.

Natalie darling, heal fast because the court of public opinion is waiting.

And it never forgets.

Until the next crown cracks, darlings, stay polished on the outside and rotten where it really counts.

Dion really shouldn't have clicked on the comment section. But curiosity was a wicked thing.

The first comment at the top made his stomach turn.

@Amanda:

Imagine blasting Elsie to ashes when Natalie was the real monster all along. Green grass, green snake. Definition of fake. Let's stop pretending, she enjoyed every second of it.

@Mira to @Amanda:

What is wrong with you? A child cannot consent. You must have literal farts in your brain for saying that.

@Amanda to @Mira:

Aww, look at the Natalie fan club scrambling. Must be hard watching your queen fall.

@Mira to @Amanda:

No, what's hard is imagining the kind of home that raised you. A condom could have prevented your existence.

Dion swallowed hard and kept scrolling.

@Penelope:

It's not abuse if both of them wanted it. And judging from those messages, Natalie definitely wanted it.

@Daisy Fairchild to @penelope :

A minor is a minor. Get that into your Neanderthal brain cells and log off forever.

It was safe to say that Dion nearly saw red as he scrolled through more comments because while some defended Natalie, many didn't.

Most of them didn't care about the truth at all. They just wanted to drag down the untouchable Natalie now they've seen the opportunity.

Dion's fingers slowly curled into fists as he stared at the screen. This wasn't just gossip anymore, it was a public execution and Nicole had handed them the knife.

Even though her article had been dressed in humor and fake concern, she had intentionally set the stage and let the crowd tear Natalie apart like meat.

Dion's jaw clenched.

He was going to destroy her. He would use her as the scape goat so others learned. There would be no escaping his wrath.

Chapter 715: On The Run

"Hurry up, you idiot," Kate snapped at the servant struggling with her luggage.

Yes. Kate Avax was running.

It was the only option left to her now.

Public opinion terrified her, but none of that compared to the fear growing in her chest at the thought of one man.

David Avax. Her husband.

If he discovered the truth before she got away, he would kill her. Kate had no doubt about that. The man was dignified, yet lethal when crossed.

There were two things that mattered to David: money and family.

The man might not wear his affection on his sleeve, but he loved his daughter, especially because she was the spawn of his first wife, the woman he had truly loved.

Unfortunately, some men had a twisted definition of love. Kate and David had been having an affair even before Natalie's mother died. Yet David never allowed that affair to interfere with the image of the perfect family he curated. He always showed up for his wife and daughter, played the devoted husband and ensured his home never lacked comfort or luxury.

And that was what Kate envied. She wanted it.

However, David had made their arrangement brutally clear and strictly controlled. Their relationship existed only at his discretion. The day she crossed the line was the day she would die. And Kate never doubted that threat.

Men with money like David had the power to make people disappear without a trace.

So when Natalie's mother, Claudia, died after her brief illness—and David asked Kate to marry him just months later—it felt like a prayer answered.

It was a dream come true, or so Kate thought.

She had assumed that all the affection she had seen David pour out on his wife, Claudia, he would do the same for her. But soon enough, it became starkly clear what David had really married her for—a nanny.

He married her to take care of his daughter.

With the added benefit of sleeping with her as his legal wife.

Sure, he gave her wealth, but Kate craved more. She wanted the same love he had given his first wife, but that was never forthcoming.

He never allowed her to bear him children either. He would always say, "Natalie is my only heir. I don't want another child coming and making her life difficult. Everything I have is hers."

And he made sure to enforce it. Every time they had sex, there was always the pill she was mandated to take, and the next morning—depending on the timing—a doctor would come in to ensure no foul play.

Her marriage became painfully monotonous. There was none of the excitement they'd once shared during their affair, and none of the passion she had imagined marriage with him would bring.

And it was all because of Natalie.

Of course, Kate took care of Natalie as David demanded, but that resentment soon grew into grudges. And those grudges twisted into darker thoughts.

What would it feel like to ruin his daughter?

She must have been out of her mind then, but the game soon became intoxicating. It was thrilling to manipulate that young mind however she wanted, and the idea that David had no clue what she was doing to his daughter only made it more exciting.

To be honest, the thought of what would happen if David ever found out what she did to his daughter had crossed her mind more than once. But once it started, it became impossible to stop. And with the way she had broken Natalie, Kate was certain the girl would never speak out. Her secret felt safe.

Until hours ago.

Kate had been seated in a private studio overlooking the city, flipping through portfolio boards and fabric swatches with her lead designer. The new fashion line was scheduled to debut next month, and everything had been running smoothly.

Then the doors burst open as her assistant rushed in and shoved her phone into her hands.

And her world collapsed.

Now, she was abandoning everything to save her life.

The servant finally loaded the last case into the trunk, and Kate climbed into the car immediately, her breath coming fast, her hands locked tight around the steering wheel.

She could see it in the servants' faces. They had heard what she did and obviously had something to say, but none of them dared open their mouths.

Kate twisted the ignition and the engine roared to life. Normally, she would be in the backseat, the driver doing all the work, but not today.

To be honest, Kate half-expected them to stop her at the gate—her husband's command—but none of that happened. Perhaps David had not heard about the scandal yet, considering he was out of the country on a business deal. With that thought, Kate hoped she would be far out of his reach before he came for her.

She had already destroyed her phone just in case they were tracking her. She was not foolish enough to leave behind anything that could implicate her. As for the car, she planned to abandon it once she reached the location she had in mind.

From there, she would go off the radar completely.

Kate's plan was to hide out in District One. It was a lawless district—chaotic, dangerous, and forgotten by most—and no one would ever expect her to run there. With the money she had on her, it would be enough to last until it was safe to move again and find a better settlement.

Kate sped down the road, the city blurring past as her heart hammered wildly in her chest. Everything was going too smoothly. There were no sirens, check points, or any shadows in pursuit.

It felt a little too easy.

A bit of unease slid down her spine, but she crushed it. Maybe luck was finally on her side.

Then Kate pressed the brakes and nothing happened.

Her breath hitched.

No way.

She stomped on the pedal again harder, and

still nothing.

Cold flooded her veins.

The brakes were gone.

#### Chapter 716: David Avax

Kate should have known it was never going to be this easy. She wasn't stupid enough to miss what this was. This had David's hand written all over it — he'd cut her brakes. He was making good on his promise to kill her.

God save her.

Terror flooded her bones as the road rushed relentlessly toward her, and Kate clenched the steering wheel so hard until her knuckles went white.

Kate should have remained on the highway, but no, she had chosen the remote cliffside where tracking her would be close to impossible. If only she knew she had played perfectly into David's plan. Or rather, he knew her too well.

To her left, there was nothing but rock wall, and to her right, the inevitable void. There would be no help for her if anything happened—because she'd be dead.

Kate was more than scared now, her breath coming in shallow gasps.

The speedometer trembled near the edge while the wind screamed through the open windows. She yanked the handbrake, but even that didn't engage.

A strangled sound tore from her throat.

"Oh God—no, no, no—"

Her hands shook violently on the steering wheel as the truth hit her in one crushing wave.

He had taken the emergency brake and planned her execution.

A sob ripped out of her chest.

"You monster... you absolute devil—"

Her vision blurred with tears as a sudden memory slammed into her.

The servants earlier—the way they stared at her. Jesus, they had known about this. If they hadn't done it upon David's orders, they had at least let her drive straight to her death.

The car hurtled faster along the curve. The cliff bent sharply ahead and Kate could see the drop now. A black, endless mouth waiting to swallow her whole.

"No—no—no—please—please—please—"

She killed the engine.

The roar of the motor died instantly, but the car kept moving, rolling on violent momentum. The steering stiffened in her hands and every slight turn became a battle of muscle and terror.

A vehicle suddenly appeared ahead, its headlights flashing. Kate had no choice but to swerve and the car fishtailed wildly.

Her scream was shredded by the wind.

She fought the wheel, her muscles screaming as the tires screeched against the asphalt. The other vehicle blasted past her in a blur of horns and shock.

Kate was crying now. Gasping. Praying. Bargaining with a God she had never believed in.

"I'll disappear—I swear—I'll vanish—I'll never speak again—just let me live—"

But no God was listening.

The cliff curve slammed toward her and the tires slipped. For one frozen second, time stuttered, right before the road ended and the front wheels left the ground.

Kate had one final, horrifying moment to think about her life so far... then her car tipped forward and the world dropped out from beneath her.

The car didn't fall all at once, it flipped.

Metal screamed as the front slammed into rock, the impact snapping the vehicle sideways. The next collision sent it cartwheeling end over end, glass exploding outward like shrapnel. Each rotation crushed more metal, tearing the body apart piece by piece as it tumbled deeper down the cliff.

Then, at the final drop, it slammed into the rocks below with a deafening crack. For one suspended second, there was only smoke.

And then the flame bloomed.

Fire burst from beneath the twisted wreckage, billowing upward as thick black smoke curled into the sky, swallowing what remained of the car in a roaring inferno.

Meanwhile...

David Avax stepped down from his private jet with the calm confidence of a business mogul.

The night air swept against his tailored suit as the runway lights glinted off the concrete. The jet's engines whined softly behind him as the stairs were rolled back into place.

His assistant was already there.

Maxwell moved quickly, taking David's travel bag before he could fully step onto the tarmac. He fell into stride beside him without needing instruction.

They walked in silence for several steps before David spoke.

"What about that matter?" he asked mildly, as if he was inquiring about a delayed shipment.

Maxwell adjusted his glasses subtly and leaned in just enough for his voice to carry only to David's ear.

"Taken care of and kept under wrap for now."

David grunted once in approval.

And that was all. No trace of emotion crossed his face — or even guilt.

As they exited the private hangar, the noise hit them like a wall.

Flashes exploded in rapid bursts while shouts rose from every direction. Reporters surged forward, their microphones extended over the barricade of guards.

"Mr. Avax! Is it true your wife was involved in a scandal with your daughter?"

"Did Kate Avax flee the country to avoid public scrutiny?"

"Are the leaked messages real?"

"Mr. Avax, will you step down as CEO?"

The questions slammed into the air like bullets but David did not answer a single one.

His security team moved instantly, forming a tight shield around him as they pushed through the mob. Reporters were shoved back, their cameras blocked. Their voices rose in frustration as David passed through them without a response.

At the edge of the lot waited his car, a sleek obsidian-black Aurelius Sovereign, custom-built, understated in design but unmistakably elite.

Maxwell opened the door swiftly and David slipped into the backseat without a word.

Then Maxwell followed him inside, shutting the door. Silence sealed around them.

The driver pulled away from the curb as the crowd's noise faded behind tinted glass.

David adjusted his cuffs calmly. "What about the company stock?"

Maxwell hesitated for a fraction of a second. "It's unstable. The leak shook public confidence. Investors are watching closely, and some already pulled out this afternoon."

David exhaled slowly, pinching the bridge of his nose, exhaustion finally showing on his face. In one day, he had nearly lost his company, his daughter—and had already lost his wife.

"Push the conference to tomorrow morning," he said at last. "For now, drive to the hospital. I need to see my daughter."

"Yes, sir."

Chapter 717: Dion and Natalie sitting On A Tree...

By night, Natalie was moved out of the ICU and into an obscenely expensive private ward, one Dion knew he would never see in his lifetime if their roles were reversed.

And right now, he was fussing over her like a mother hen.

"You sure you're okay?" Dion asked for the fourth time, already lifting the cup of water again. "Your throat might be dry."

Natalie gave the look as he carefully held the straw to her lips. "Dion, I promise I won't evaporate if you stop hovering for five minutes."

He waited until she'd taken a few sips before lowering the cup. Then, as if he remembered something urgent, he adjusted her pillow, fluffed it once, then gently shifted the blanket higher so it covered her properly.

"That's really not necessary," she said, heat creeping into her cheeks.

"I know," he replied simply. "But I want to."

That made her pause.

Dion moved to the side of the bed and gently took her foot in his hands. "Your legs were tense earlier. Sometimes massaging helps people relax."

In a twinkle of an eye, he was massaging her feet. But instead of it helping her relax, Natalie burst into a soft giggle. "Dion, that tickles!"

Except that little movement tugged at her ribs and she hissed faintly.

Instant panic crossed Dion's face, and he dropped her foot immediately. "Hey—hey—don't laugh. You're injured."

Natalie told him. "How exactly do you expect me not to laugh when something tickles?"

Dion exhaled, half relieved she was okay, and half flustered. "I'll just stop then."

He moved closer to her side of the bed instead, resting his hand on the mattress near her arm. "Do you need anything else? Should I call the nurse to check on you?"

Natalie shook her head slowly. "No. I'm good. Really."

Then silence settled between them. It was not an uncomfortable one, just awkward and underlined with a strange tension.

Their eyes met, and for a moment neither of them looked away. There was something different in the air now, but Dion cleared his throat, ruining the moment.

"You should sleep now. I'll keep watch," Dion said to her.

Natalie frowned. "Or rather, you're the one who needs the rest."

As expected, he shook his head. "You're the one in a hospital bed, and I promised I wouldn't leave your side."

"You already did more than enough, Dion" she said. "You stayed with me all through the accident, the ambulance, the ICU... Do you have any idea the physical and mental toll that must've taken on you?"

"Not when it's my fault you were in that crash."

Natalie stared at him. "What?"

"Oh, come on, Dion," she scoffed weakly. "You're not seriously blaming yourself for my accident."

"Isn't that the truth, though? If I hadn't appeared in your mirror, you wouldn't have been distracted. You would've seen the car coming from the opposite side."

"No," Natalie said firmly. "You might have actually saved my life. For God's sake, Dion, I was speeding. I wasn't thinking straight. I was the one who put myself in danger and you're the one who made me slow down."

Dion went silent, stunned by her words. For once, he had no argument.

"If anything..." Natalie murmured, her voice dropping. "I should be thanking you with a kiss, my hero."

Dion froze.

His face turned beet red in seconds, his jaw nearly unhinging. "Y-you don't need to..." he stammered, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

Natalie smiled knowingly. "Yeah, unfortunately, I can't right now. Every time I move, my lungs scream in protest."

She paused, then her eyes glinted mischievously.

"...But you can," she added lightly. "Do the kissing for both of us."

Her words lingered in the air.

Dion stared at her, completely flustered, his heart pounding like it wanted to burst through his ribs.

"You're joking, right?"

Natalie lifted a brow. "You're the one who suggested we 'date for content' earlier, remember?"

Dion groaned. "I know. That was stupid of me. Moreover, I was only pulling your legs."

Natalie stood her ground, "Well, whether you meant it or not, right now, this is a thank-you kiss."

Dion swallowed hard, his pulse thundering in his ears. "A-Are you sure...?"

Natalie's eyes sharpened, suddenly intense despite the weakness in her body. "Kiss. Me. Now. Dion."

The command left Dion no room to breathe, much less argue. He hesitated one last second, then leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.

It was soft and careful, barely more than a brush. A tentative kiss that lasted only a few seconds before he pulled back, heart racing like he'd just run a mile.

Natalie blinked. That was it?

"Really, Dion?" She was disappointed. "Now I understand why they call you 'single Dion', you're even more single than—"

She never finished the sentence because Dion leaned in and kissed her again, cutting off her teasing words as surprise shone in her eyes.

He pressed his lips more firmly against hers this time, and Natalie forgot all about the pain. She didn't even realize when her hand lifted to slide into his hair, pulling him closer. Dion kissed her slowly, surer now. When she opened up for him, his tongue slipped in.

Natalie moaned as his tongue brushed the roof of her mouth before tangling with hers in tantalizing strokes. Then he withdrew just enough to capture her lower lip and suck hard. He bit down lightly, sending sharp pain through her before soothing it with another deep kiss.

Holy creator of the universe

Natalie knew she was a goner.

Dion kissed her for a while before finally

pulling back, both of them breathing hard.

Natalie stared at him, shocked, something unfamiliar lighting her eyes. What the hell just happened? That had been mind-blowing—and she wanted it again.

Dion asked softly, "Was that good enough?"

For the first time since the accident, Natalie smiled without pain in her eyes.

"Hotter than hell."

Dion grinned.

Then the door burst open, and the happiness was instantly ripped out of the room.

Chapter 718: A Better Wife

Dion knew something was wrong the moment the door opened and the smile drained from Natalie's face. He turned at once and the breath hitched in his throat.

There he was. David Avax.

The wolves might have their alphas, but humans had David Avax—king of technology, billionaire powerhouse, and one of the most dangerous men alive. And, most importantly, Natalie's father.

Natalie was a split image of her father. Same dirty-blonde hair, same jawline sharp enough to cut. Where she carried stunning hazel eyes, David's were an icy gray capable of freezing hell over. Nonetheless, Natalie was very much Daddy's girl.

The man stared coldly at him and Dion couldn't even move, his mouth parting uselessly. What was he going to say?

Hi sir, I'm Dion. I apparently saved your daughter from a crash and to thank me, we kissed just a minute ago before you arrived?

Yep, not happening.

Finally, David broke the silence, his voice low and edged. "Who are you?"

As intimidating as David was, Dion somehow summoned the spine to answer.

"I'm Dion, Natalie's classmate—"

"And the one who saved me from the crash," Natalie cut in sharply, her lips pressed together in warning.

David's hard stare shifted to his daughter. She met it head-on, a silent war passing between them. Natalie dared him to dismiss or belittle the boy who had helped her.

Though not a single ounce of aloofness left his expression, David finally turned back to Dion and said, polite but distant,

"Well. Thank you for saving my daughter, Dion. You'll be rewarded for that."

"Huh?" Dion felt like he heard wrong.

"Oh God," Natalie groaned, dragging a hand over her face, absolutely drowning in second-hand embarrassment.

Dion straightened immediately. "I'm good, sir. I didn't rescue Natalie to receive anything in return. We're friends..." His voice trailed at the end. Friends didn't kiss like that, but Dion shoved the thought aside. It was a thank-you kiss, like Natalie said. Nothing more. Probably.

David's perfectly shaped brow lifted. "Friends, huh?"

"Very good friends," Natalie said pointedly, a declaration and a warning in one.

David's gaze shifted to his daughter again, tension thick in the air. Dion swallowed hard and stepped back, desperate to escape the invisible battlefield between father and daughter.

"Urm... I'll wait outside while you talk to her and come back later," he said, clearing his throat.

David's frown deepened. "Come back later?"

Dion gulped. "I-I promised to take care of Natalie."

"Yes, he did," Natalie added without hesitation.

"That won't be necessary," David replied, his tone clipped and final. "Her caretaker is standing right outside that door and will take over once I'm done."

"Oh." Dion flushed. Of course she had a caretaker—why hadn't that crossed his mind? Suddenly he felt stupid, very stupid, for assuming she needed him in that way.

Feeling like he was intruding, Dion awkwardly lifted a hand in a tiny wave.

"I... hope you make a quick recovery, then."

"I'll see you tomorrow then?" Natalie asked.

Dion paused, glancing at David and catching the tight clench of the man's jaw. Yep. He definitely didn't like him.

"Right?" Natalie pressed, leveling her father with a fierce stare.

Somehow, that gave Dion courage. His familiar smile tugged at his lips. "Sure. I'll be here tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after the next until you've recovered."

This time, Natalie's face lit up. Good. That was the spirit she wanted to see. For a moment earlier she'd been disappointed watching him shrink under her father's presence, but now he'd found his footing, and the expression on David's face was priceless.

"See you then," Dion said, about to leave when—

"Dion?" Natalie said.

It killed him a little inside. What now? "What?" he asked, voice gentle.

She pointed to her cheek. "Goodbye peck, love."

Dion immediately understood. Natalie was using him to irritate her father on purpose—and there was no universe where he would turn that down. Not after the bastard married the woman who hurt her.

He walked to her bedside. But instead of giving the peck she requested, he leaned down and kissed her on the lips again. Natalie responded instantly, wrapping one arm around his neck, moving her mouth against his with equal intensity.

He didn't deepen it—he wasn't suicidal enough to disrespect David directly—but it was still intimate enough to drive the point home.

When they pulled apart, Natalie was breathless, eyes sparkling like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Sleep tight," Dion murmured, then pressed a soft peck to her cheek and straightened.

To David Avax, he said, "Have a lovely time with your daughter, sir." Then he slipped past him and walked out with a quiet confidence that bordered on swagger.

The door shut.

Silence thickened the room.

A battle of wills began the moment their eyes met.

"Really, Natalie?" David's tone dripped with condescension. "We're dating that kind of people now?"

Natalie hissed. "That kind of people?" She stared at him, disbelief burning through her exhaustion. Then an unsettling calm washed over her as she spat, "Well, those kinds of people are better than your high-class wife who abused me for years."

There was a crack in his cold armor, and for the first time, remorse flickered across David's face.

He stepped closer. "You should have come to me."

"Really?" Natalie scoffed. "Did you have time for me? The little attention I asked for after Mother died, what did you do? You married the woman who abused me. And now you stand here acting like a father? How dare you?!"

"You're right," David admitted. "I should have chosen better. If I had known Kate was like that, I would have made a better choice."

"Oh God," Natalie groaned, exasperated. His apology for years of neglect was choosing a better wife? She was furious.

"You don't have to worry about Kate, not anymore," David said.

"What?" Natalie stilled, then narrowed her eyes. "What have you done, Father?"

David held her gaze.

"Kate is dead."

Natalie's breath vanished, every drop of blood in her body turning to ice.

Chapter 719: Ruin Her Life

For a moment, Natalie couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Kate was dead?

How?

Then a chilling realization washed over her like ice water.

Natalie looked at her father, accusation in her voice. "You killed her."

David didn't even flinch. He simply said, calm as stone, "I took care of the problem. Kate should have known better than to lay a hand on you."

Natalie's mouth fell open, staring at him in disbelief. "So that's it?"

David lifted a brow, as if confused. "That's what?"

"You killed her without giving her the chance to pay for her crimes?"

David answered with flat finality. "She's already paying for it. In hell."

The words punched the breath out of her.

"So what about me?" Natalie whispered, feeling heartbroken, furious, and betrayed.

David sighed, rubbing his temple like she was the one inconveniencing him. "Natalie," he said with exhausted patience, "you know what happens if this becomes a public trial, right? There will be reporters digging into every detail. Endless headlines. You being dragged through the mud. Our family name permanently stained—"

"No, don't—" Natalie snapped, cutting him off. "Don't make this about me."

The anger boiling in her chest pushed her upright. She wasn't about to have this conversation lying helpless in a hospital bed.

David saw her strain and said quickly, "You're not supposed to—"

Pain shot through her ribs as she forced herself up, teeth gritted so hard her jaw trembled. Seeing she wouldn't stop, David helped her sit upright only for Natalie to shove his hand away the second she was steady.

Her voice shook with rage.

"Don't pretend this is about protecting me," she spat. "You're not worried about what I went through. You're worried about your 'perfect family' being exposed in court records forever."

David went still.

"You're worried about Avax stock plummeting again. About the shareholders panicking and your enemies smelling blood in the water. So don't you dare," she hissed, jabbing a finger at him, "try to make this about me."

The silence between them thickened until it felt like the walls themselves were holding their breath.

Then David spoke up, "Think whatever you want to think, Natalie, but everything I'm doing is for you. I'm not going to sit back and let you be destroyed publicly. Which is why tomorrow we'll be releasing a statement debunking every claim as fabricated."

David continued without pause, shifting into that detached executive tone reserved for crises, and damage control.

"My communications division, digital forensics, and crisis mitigation teams are already coordinating. They'll scramble the digital footprint, and produce a counter-report. We are overwriting the narrative before it spreads any further."

Natalie sat stone-still, watching him the way one watches a hurricane swallow a coastline, powerless to stop the destruction he brought.

David kept talking, laying out his plans.

"In the morning, news of Kate's death will go public and that shifts the public attention from scandal to tragedy. They will see us as the grieving husband and traumatized daughter who lost their wife and mother because of falsified posts. Pity is a great emotion and it would shut down the questions."

Natalie's mouth parted, her chest tightening. "You're using Kate's death?"

"I'm redirecting the damage she did. At least in death the bitch can be useful." David said flatly.

Natalie's stomach churned. She had no idea who was worse at this point. Her father was just as bad as Kate notwithstanding his intentions.

"And," he continued, "we will sue Elsie Lancaster for defamation, emotional distress, and tampering with private property."

Natalie's mouth fell open in surprise. "Elsie? What does Elsie have to do with this?"

David gave her a look that was half disbelief, half disdain. "How could you surround yourself with foolish hormonal teenagers? Elsie Lancaster paid the one who stole your phone and leaked those messages."

Natalie froze. Elsie Lancaster did this?

Her thoughts spun violently. Clearly Elsie was angered because she demanded her expulsion and retaliated by detonating her entire life.

That stupid, vindictive, pathetic girl. What had she expected after nearly killing a student.

Natalie felt both sick and furious.

David went on, his irritation rising. "You're Natalie Avax, how careless were you that some little rat stole your phone and gained access to such sensitive material?"

Natalie's cheeks burned with humiliation, unable to defend herself.

"But don't worry." David's voice darkened. "By the time I'm done with her, I'll strip Elsie Lancaster of whatever pathetic wealth her family thinks they possess. These werewolves have grown annoyingly arrogant, sometimes I wonder why anyone tolerates their existence."

David's words turned into white noise because Natalie wasn't listening anymore.

How had everything fallen apart so catastrophically?

David must have sensed he had pushed too far because his tone softened. "You should rest now. I will handle everything."

"Yeah," Natalie spat, "as usual."

He sighed. "I know how you feel, Natalie, but sometimes sacrifices must be made in life."

She turned her face away, refusing to acknowledge him.

"And after you recover," he added gently, "I'll have you see a therapist."

That snapped something inside her.

"I don't need a fucking therapist!" Natalie exploded. "I needed justice. But since you handled that already, there's nothing left for you to do. So leave me the fuck alone!"

David opened his mouth, paused, then closed it again. There was almost regret, or was it fatigue in his eyes, but he said nothing as he turned to leave.

At the doorway, he stopped briefly. The caretaker who had been waiting stepped forward and David told her quietly, "Take very good care of her."

Then he left.

The caretaker entered gently, lowering Natalie back onto the bed. Even the softest movement made Natalie hiss in pain.

"Do you need anything else?" the caretaker asked her.

"Leave me the fuck alone," Natalie glared at her.

The caretaker nodded without protest and quietly slipped out. She was used to the tempers of the wealthy; this was nothing new.

The moment the door clicked shut, Natalie turned her face into the pillow,

and sobbed.

She missed her mama.

Chapter 720: The Royal Degree

Back in the Fae realm...

The palace was never this bustling unless there was a celebration, but today was different, and for good reason.

Their princess had practically destroyed half their homes during sex last night. Yes, while Alaric was summoning thunder and lightning that shook the entire earth, it hadn't struck one place but many.

Now, a long line of faeries stood outside the throne room door, each ready to present their complaints and demand compensation.

Although Queen Seraphira sat upon her throne, it was Lila, Rhara, and Lord Taryn who presided over the session while the queen "rested."

No one knew of the Queen's incident last night. And while she should have been recuperating, her absence during such a dramatic aftermath would have been far too suspicious. Queen Seraphira would rather die than give Baron control over her court again.

The sight was not funny.

Right now, Fae of every size, and type packed the floor in a snaking line that stretched all the way to the courtyard.

Queen Seraphira reclined on her throne, her posture so relaxed that one would never think she was unwell.

Lila and Rhara stood on both sides of the dais, while Lord Taryn sat at a smaller desk, elegant as ever, sipping a drink and mentally preparing for the stress ahead.

The first petitioner stomped forward.

It was a brownie matriarch, no taller than Lila's thigh, but radiating enough rage to fell an army. Her gray hair was wrapped in a kerchief patterned with tiny mushrooms, and her apron was singed.

She curtsied to the queen, then stated her complaint.

"Our entire warren fell off the oak thanks to the thunderstorm last night."

Lila's mouth fell. "The entire thing?"

It was a known fact Brownies build their warrens inside oak roots, where they value peace and stability above all else.

Unfortunately, Alaric's lightning rattled the entire forest, causing their underground dwellings to collapse and send their families tumbling out. For brownies, that's the ultimate household catastrophe.

"Everything!" the brownie snapped. "Do you know what it is to have sixteen screaming grandbabies raining down in the middle of the night because someone in the palace forgot that thunder echoes through roots?"

Rhara coughed into her hand to hide a laugh, unlike Taryn who looked miserable trying to keep a straight face.

"Lady Mosswhistle," Taryn said gracefully, "the court acknowledges the structural inconvenience. Your demand for recompense?"

"We want a new tree," Mosswhistle declared. "One with thicker roots and no direct line to the princess bed chamber."

Seraphira lifted one brow, just enough to quiet the room.

"The crown will assign earth wielders to reinforce your oak and enchant the roots against future disturbances. You may also claim a new pantry set from the palace stores."

Mosswhistle's anger faltered. "A new pantry?"

"Yes, all made from crystals instead of clay and holds heat and cold. Not to mention shatter proof even in eh... beast-made thunderstorms."

The brownie tried to keep her scowl but greed won. "Fine. But if that thunder beast shakes my rafters, I will personally march in here with all sixteen grandbabies."

"Noted," Rhara said dryly. Stars forbid those sixteen grandbabies come marching into the palace the next time Violet "shakes the foundations" again.

"Next."

A trio of river nymphs flowed forward, their dresses still damp and hair frizzed so badly it looked like they had lost a fight with a storm cloud.

"Our pool boiled," the tallest announced, hands on her hips. "Do you know what lightning through water does to our glamours?"

Lila winced. "I can imagine."

"It fried our hair," the smallest wailed, tugging a brittle curl. "Do you know how long it takes to coax this shine back with moonlight and kelp oil?"

"Your sacrifice will be sung about for generations," Taryn said sarcastically.

Lila shot him a look and he shrugged it off. Lord Taryn's jokes were the worst.

Rhara said to them, "The court offers your kind a full restoration. New glamours, fresh stones for your grotto, and a week of exclusive use of the palace hot springs."

The middle nymph perked up. "Exclusive?"

"With temperature regulation," Lila added. "And thunder wards, of course."

The nymphs exchanged a look, coming to a conclusion.

"Very well," their leader said, flicking the wet hair over her shoulder. "But perhaps next time the lightning beast can keep his storms above the cloud line, and not inside our river."

And just like that, they left the same way they came.

"Next," Rhara called quickly.

A swarm of pixies flew forward, a dozen glowing bodies buzzing around each other's heads. One of the bold pixies with wings, a violent neon green, stepped out as their spokesperson.

"We were sleeping," he accused, jabbing a thumb at his chest. "when the sky exploded. Repeatedly."

"It rattled the dew off our flowers," a green-wing pixie snapped. "Do you know what that does to pollen schedules?"

"We also heard screaming," a third piped up. "A different kind of screaming that wasn't educational."

"Goddess above," Rhara knew what they were talking about. Everyone heard it.

Seraphira smiled just a fraction. They were really cute. "You have a complaint, little spark, or are you simply offering a review?"

The pixie puffed out its chest and demanded. "We want compensation. Extra nectar rations for the next moon, and a ward over the pixie fields that dampens thunder after midnight."

Taryn tilted his head. "So you wish the royal household to fund your nightlife."

"Yes," green-wing said promptly.

"Approved," Queen Seraphira said. "You will receive two extra nectar deliveries and a localized quiet ward. Next."

The line moved of course. A dryad with singed leaves, a stone sprite whose boulders had cracked, a terrified flock of glow moth shepherds whose lanterns had shattered. What was common was that each had a story all tied back to the same storm that had rolled out of the princess's chamber like a shockwave.

By the time a bog fae shuffled forward, smelling strongly of swamp and mud, the Queen's head hurt.

"The thunder scared my mire beasts, and they stampeded. One of them sat on my house." he complained.

The bog Fae's skin was the color of wet moss, and had eyes like underground lakes.

"Was anyone injured?" Lila asked, bracing herself.

"My pride." He sniffed. "And my stew pot."

"We will have builders reinforce your bank and deliver new cookware," Taryn said, yawning. "Perhaps avoid housing under stampede paths in the future."

The bog grumbled, but took the deal.

On and on it went with complaints, bargains, and compensations. Fae nitpicked and haggled over the size of trees, how many extra jars of honey counted as a proper apology, and so on.

By the third hour, Queen Seraphira had made a silent royal decree to herself: thunder wards were going up in this palace, and the entire realm was going to adopt them by force if necessary.

She was not living through this nightmare again.

And until those wards were installed, Violet was—by royal decree—banned from having sex.